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## REVIEWS

### ON THE ART OF WRITING

During 1913-14 Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch delivered at the University of Cambridge a series of twelve lectures on the art of writing.<sup>1</sup> His fitness to discuss such a topic before university men is indicated by his long practice in works too little known and appreciated in America. His poetic responsiveness is attested by the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, the best general anthology ever published.

The hearers of these lectures had an advantage not possible to the readers of the book—they could catch the delightful inflections and tones of the lecturer's voice, and catch at first hand the charming quips, the satiric glance, the elevated brow, which pointed some of the remarks necessarily toned down by the black and white page. But even the reader as he finishes has the complacent delight of having spent valuable moments in the presence of the best type of man—a cultured gentleman. For this reason, and for the more practical one of having his own attitude corrected, adjusted, or strengthened, every person in the United States who has anything to do with the upbringing of youth—parent, minister, principal, professor, teacher, especially these latter whose subjects are English, language, history—should read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest this volume. For those teachers and pupils who never can, never expect, to write a line fit for publication or payment, there is valuable instruction for approaching and appreciating literature. They will enjoy the incisive remarks on the poetry of Mr. Alfred Noyes, Wyatt, Homer, and a half-hundred others. The hopeful who believe that the art of writing can be developed for life-occupations (recall that Milton and Shelley chose to be poets) will find here not only general directions concerning suitability, taste, choice, style, but quite explicit discriminations concerning hybrids, abstract and concrete words, brevity compared with circumlocution, transitive verbs, vowel sequences in poetry, active voice, right emphasis.

To those Americans who care for language as a beautiful accomplishment both in speaking and in writing, a blush of shame must come to read this. "The editor of a mining paper in Denver, U.S.A., boldly the other day laid down this law, that niceties of language were mere

<sup>1</sup> *On the Art of Writing*. By Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. New York: Putnam. \$1.50.

'frills'; all a man needed was to 'get there,' that is, to say what he wished in his own way." The lecturer's comment echoes entirely our opinion. "But just here, we found, lies the mischief. You will not get there by hammering away on your untutored impulse."

In amplification of this theme one entire lecture entitled "Jargon" has a particular poignancy for slovenly Americans. This is its frankly acknowledged text: "No two men (unless they talk jargon) say the same thing in the same way." Recall the weary monotony of pedagogues in practice, the stereotyped answers by pupils and students, the weary iteration of remarks upon the weather, golf, cards, business, the exaggerated bathos of women, the pedantic involvency of legal phraseology, the meaningless locutions of everyday speech, the ambiguities of the wind-bag politician, and you will read and re-read this lecture with recurrent chuckles. The illustrations here presented are a joy forever. Does a minister in the House of Commons ever answer a question by saying "No"? Hardly. He replies, "The answer to the question is in the negative." Jargon! "In any case, let us send you a case on approval." Jargon! "He was conveyed to his place of residence in an intoxicated condition." Jargon! "A singular degree of rarity prevails in the earlier editions of this romance." Jargon! In the United States, of course, spoken jargon is worse than this.

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch believes that the way to write well is to write continuously both prose and verse; not that one may become quickly by such means a master in either form, but that this constant practice makes the skilled craftsman, and the discriminator among words. His writing and his speech will grow more and more accurate, perspicuous, persuasive, appropriate—the four epithets are the lecturer's own. Very naturally these keen discussions of writing call for words to fulfil the monitor's precepts. He is not afraid to startle with the correct term, even though it be unfamiliar; that is your fault not his. And you should be grateful that he sends you to the dictionary to investigate such terms as "palmary," "discinct," "culmen," "suppeditate," "fissiparous," "Agepamone," "teraphin," "equipollent," "subsumed."

The second part of the book, though still dealing with the art of writing, turns from a more didactic analysis to an exposition of the lineage of English literature, and English literature in universities. Under the first of these is made a declaration enforced by italics which will startle and antagonize those who magnify the Teutonic element in English literature, and begin all compilations and textbooks with *Widsith* and *Doer's Lament*, for Sir Arthur emphatically states:

Let me repeat it in words that admit of no misunderstanding: From Anglo-Saxon Prose, from Anglo-Saxon poetry our living Prose and Poetry have, save linguistically, no derivation. I shall attempt to demonstrate that, whether or not Anglo-Saxon literature, such as it was, died of inherent weakness, die it did, and of its collapse the *Vision of Piers Plowman* may be regarded as the last dying spasm. I shall attempt to convince you that Chaucer did not inherit any secret from Caedmon or Cynewulf, but deserves his old title, "Father of English Poetry," because through Dante, through Boccaccio, through the lays and songs of Provence, he explored back to the Mediterranean and opened for Englishmen a commerce in the true intellectual mart of Europe.

Those lovers of literature who can read French, Italian, Spanish, and their earlier dialects will declare that the author definitely proves this thesis. In tracing literary movements we always seem to move from the present back to the Elizabethans, from them to the Renaissance Italians, and from them back to Latins and Greeks; if our first station be among the Augustan writers we must next step across to France, then just as certainly to the old classics. If we can remain on English soil back as far as Chaucer, he inevitably leads us to Romance literatures.

"But," a student might object, "granted that I can write as you have so far required, what shall I do to acquire that quality called style, without which there is no reason for writing at all?" The last lecture is devoted to both philosophizing and directing about this. Walter Pater is not mentioned. (I believe he forfeited his right to give advice when, in declaring that sentences should be so constructed that they need no punctuation, he evolved an intricate period containing nearly every printer's mark); Lessing, Flaubert, Goethe are the critics who had the authority to say something valuable about style.

This then is style. As technically manifested in Literature it is the power to touch with ease, grace, precision, any note in the gamut of human thought or emotion.

But essentially it resembles good manners. It comes of endeavoring to understand others, of thinking of them rather than for yourself—of thinking, that is, with the heart as well as the head. It gives rather than receives; it is noble, careless of thanks or applause, not being fed by these but rather sustained and continually refreshed by an inward loyalty to the best. Yet like "character" it has its altar within; to that retires for counsel, from that fetches its illumination, to ray outwards. Cultivate, Gentlemen, that habit of withdrawing to be advised by the best. So says Fenelon, "you will find yourself infinitely quieter, your words will be fewer and more effectual; and while you make less ado, what you do will be more profitable."

CLARENCE STRATTON